



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-PRT Assistance Center Gives Sadr City Residents New Hope-

By Tom Hill and Ted Andrews
Special Correspondents

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Sadr City, Iraq - The lives of more than two million residents of this crowded district in the capital are improving thanks to recent outreach efforts by the embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team (EPRT) operating on the community level.

Baghdad EPRT 3 is active in a number of areas; ranging from financial help for students, providing medical equipment to treat indigent children, and mentoring the district councils of Adhamiyah and Sadr City on governance issues.

But few of the team's activities are as rewarding or as important as its partnership with Iraqis on the Iraqi Assistance Center (IAC) established following savage fighting that raged in the District from March to May 2008.

The IAC's principal mission is straightforward and also complicated. It processes Iraqi claims for reimbursement for damages caused by recent military action by U.S. Forces. To date, the IAC's staff of a director and three full-time employees has paid over 500 claims in excess of \$1.3 million.

But while the number of claimants has dropped since August, the IAC still sees a steady flow of visitors. Each week the Center receives inquiries from over 200 Iraqis because it provides information to family members about detainees. It also takes applications for micro-grants to help the area's numerous small-scale entrepreneurs get back on their feet and expand businesses.

In fulfilling these myriad tasks, the IAC is a bank, a public relations office, a legal aid clinic, and even a legislator's district office.



PRT-funded Iraqi Assistance Center opens for business in Sadr City.

To understand why the IAC matters so much, an idea of where it operates is important. The first thing to know is that Sadr City has long had an infamous reputation. To most of the Iraqi capital's residents, it is known as a teeming slum, a no-hope neighborhood crammed with poor people living in rundown houses with only minimal city services.

Others know the area in a political sense. Sadr City is the home, albeit not the actual residence, of Shi'a cleric Moqtada Al Sadr, leader of the Office of the Martyr Sadr and godfather to the JAM militia and its even more violent offshoot, the Special Group criminals.

The latter group was responsible for sparking almost two months of heavy fighting in the District when its fighters greeted Easter Sunday with a bombardment of the Green Zone by Iranian-supplied rockets. The resulting fight to root the terrorists out of Sadr City took many lives – U.S. and Iraqi – and damaged a lot of property.

After the fighting stopped at the end of May 2008, many people required immediate help. More importantly, it was clear that the tenuous peace in Sadr City could easily come to a violent halt if progress did not begin quickly.

So, the Coalition and the Iraqi government initiated a multi-million dollar set of projects designed to provide jobs, improve the infrastructure, and otherwise make life better for area residents. That is where the IAC filled an important niche.

The EPRT's support for the IAC began on a low level. Because the team already was working to help families of the area track detainees picked up by Iraqi forces, it was a simple matter for the attorney hired to do this important job to transfer his office to the IAC.

His talents as an ombudsman were obviously relevant to many of the IAC's activities, so it was an equally simple matter for him gradually to take on more and more work, including supervision of the staff hired to handle claims. The EPRT hired him formally to lead the IAC in August.

The original plan was for the IAC to set up shop inside Sadr City's district council building. This would have been an elegant solution to the housing problem as this structure already had abundant electricity and air-conditioning. However, the June 24 bombing that took the lives of five people, including two EPRT 3 team members, and severely wounded a senior member of the District Council ended that idea.

Working with community leaders, the EPRT next moved to locate and furnish a trailer of the type used as office space at construction sites around the world. Funding from the team helped ensure that the search for a suitable structure moved quickly.

The result is that the Sadr City Iraqi Assistance Center (IAC) opened at its new location on September 2, 2008.

The opening ceremony included a brief ribbon cutting ceremony presided over by the Sadr City DAC Chairman Hassan Shama, the man injured in the June 24 blast and the IAC's director. Coalition officials and members of EPRT 3 were on hand too.

As military engagements in Sadr City decrease, so too will the need for an IAC operating as a claims center. That said, Iraqi citizens will continue to have need of a place to go to help them find their way through the maze of government and the IAC will serve that purpose.